

Critique of Lesage

Julia LeSage's essay *S/Z and The Rules of the Game* is an analysis of Jean Renoir's film through the application of Barthes's book *S/Z*. Barthes, whose scholarly work "has functioned implicitly as a polemic against and explicitly as a corrective to current critical practice" (477) adapts in this book the theories expounded by such social scientists as Claude Levi-Strauss to the study of literary paradigm and iconography. Critical of theorists who state in absolute terms the transcendent denotation and connotation of imagery, and who feel confident in their enumerations of all possible narrative structures, and the implications thereof, Barthes sees literary elements as limited to reflect only the cultural coding of the artist's milieu. Where other theorists read nature, Barthes reads society.

The essay goes on to explicate "five main areas of cultural coding" which form "a braid ... one strand being picked up, worked into the major pattern, and left for a while ..." (479) in the weaving of a narrative work of art. The strands are composed of the unique "ordinary" of the piece's temporal and geographic location. The first level of coding is the "enigmatic code," which gives the story a plot by "implanting certain key questions or enigmas and then delaying the answers or giving false leads ..." (480). The second level is that of "action codes," which establish what actions are appropriate in a given situation, as well as which of these appropriate actions are appropriate to display in the given context. "Referential codes," the third level, are "facts" and "common sense." Scientific knowledge, history, popular culture, and unquestioned assumptions fall into this category. The fourth level, that of "semic codes," provides adjectival elements which enable the audience to label characters, and thus to immediately understand the "certain attributes and certain motives" (480) peculiar to that stereotype. The fifth level is called the "symbolic code." It is on this level that Barthes calls into action the works of Freud and Levi-Strauss "to describe the symbolic 'economy' of a narrative and define the major symbolic rhetorical device in literature as

antithesis” (480). LeSage considers the work of Eisenstein, Bazin, or any other film theorist to be inferior to an approach based on Barthes’s literary analysis, because they do not address the connection between form and content and society.

LeSage uses *The Rules of the Game* as a filmic example to which she can apply a Barthesian analysis. On the enigmatic level, the film involves “the shifting sexual relations between more than half a dozen characters” (485). These relations are contextualized as contained within a social class – either the aristocracy or their proletariat servants – or they are contextualized as the interaction between these two social classes. In the service of screenwriting convention, particular attributes which seem natural to these classes will be carefully distributed so as to distinguish the characters as class-aligned. Hence, not only the enigmatic codes, but additionally the semic codes are pronounced. Such characteristics as verbal patterns and clothing serve to communicate stereotype. Genevieve’s black gown, her cigarette holder are semic indicators of her aristocracy and of her worldliness simultaneously.

On the third level, that of “codes of cultural reference” (289), the fate of characters is determined by their conformity to the “reality” understood by members of the context culture. When Andre, the fearless pilot, upon his landing in France takes the opportunity to complain about the absence of Christine, married to Robert, at the event, he has transcended the “common sense” rules of kinship and marriage which are “real” to audience and filmmaker. This transcendence informs the audience that Andre will be a source of conflict – that the movie will have to somehow reconcile his antithetical behavior with proper coded behavior.

Action codes inform the filmmaker not only of what actions will be considered natural by his viewer, but also of what presentation of those actions will be considered natural. That, in film, a person need not take as much time to cross a room as in real life, is a presentation of motion accepted instantly by the audience. The cross-cutting patterns of filmed conversation correspond to societal conceptions of conversation –

shifting from one person's point of view to the other person's perspective, and back again.

The symbolic coding is the most subtle. A Barthesian analysis is tied closely to Claude Levi-Strauss's theories of binary opposition, and social economy. *The Rules of the Game* attributes itself well to this level of analysis because its story is very directly motivated by a network of relationships each of which provides antithesis. LeSage identifies "civilization/nature; sincerity/lies; ingenuousness/sophistication ..." among others. Moreover, the network of relationships provides examples of various kinship and marital values. Although Andre's radio speech seems to transgress the marital bonds of Christine and Robert, Christine's honesty vindicates her of any transgression. Additionally, this sincerity within the marriage of Christine and Robert leads Robert to end his affair with Genevieve. The marital values of society are very clearly depicted in the wholesomeness and happiness that belong to sincere and monogamous spouses. This level of coding also operates in translating symbolic references. Octave's struggle to get out of his bear costume symbolizes "his sexuality and [says] something about his coming emergence from an avuncular role to that of Christine's potential lover" (497).

Benjamin Meyer

Part II - Statement

The Rules of the Game begins with the statement that “This story, set on the eve of World War II, is intended as entertainment – not as social criticism.” It was in that same year of High School Literature that I read *Huckleberry Finn*, which begins with a statement condemning academic analysis. It is safe to say that a story featuring the escape of a black man set in the time of slavery in America, is going to be about as purely entertaining as a movie featuring a mocking sketch of dancing Hassidic Jews deliberately set at a moment in history when Jews were being herded off to concentration camps. Surely, neither Mark Twain nor Jean Renoir could be possessed of such poor taste. And one can not avoid discerning sharp oppositions within the representations of “reality” in each.

The Rules of the Game is replete with binary oppositions that can be read as typical both of class differences and of the general attitude of that moment in history. LeSage points to the very first opposition, that of the public life and the private life. The public life, represented by Andre’s radio announcement of his special friendship with Christine, imposes, as such, on what an audience would consider to be Christine’s private life. But there is more to that opposition. There is also an immediate opposition of technological construction, represented by the broadcast radio, and the private sphere, represented by romantic affection. Renoir uses the referentially coded knowledge of broadcast technology as the generator of tension. Later on, when Andre first arrives at the summer home, Christine disperses gossip generated by that radio announcement by making an announcement on a smaller scale. Mass communication is the enemy of truth, and its opposite, communication among small groups of people, ends falsity. Hence, an opposition is between technological and direct communication is given value.

That opposition is furthered later on, when Christine, peering through binoculars,

misconstrues an embrace shared by Robert and Genevieve. The magnification effected by man-made means is an enemy of truth. The very personal contact and communication of Robert and Genevieve, on the other hand, had brought understanding. In both cases, technology very directly serves to deepen an enigma.

Technology further serves as a seme. Among the guests is a couple that owns a factory. The wife, while following Christine up the stairs, asks Christine what she thinks about the new typhoid vaccine. Christine responds that she does not think about it at all. The bourgeois factory owner goes on to explain how sick her children had been before it came around. The scene is, on the one hand, reminiscent of the racetrack scene in *My Fair Lady* when Julie Andrews fails miserably to assimilate. Aristocrats do not discuss such morbid issues (albeit, the hunters are free to laugh about poor Georges, who accidentally killed himself at last year's hunt). But additionally, Christine hardly acknowledges any awareness of the scientific advance. Rather than merely creating an opposition describing the factory owner as unclassy, the interchange furthers a semic code describing Christine as separate from technology.

Well, then, Christine is aligned with naivete, by her ignorance of her husband's affair, honesty, by her faithfulness to her husband, and then is separated from technology, and is tarnished only by the effects of technological magnification. Octave eloquently sums up the motif when he explains to a technologically tarnished Christine that, in a society in which the media, hugely empowered by technological advance, showers society with lies, "Why shouldn't individuals lie, too?"

But to leave the representation of technology in *The Rules of the Game* as a signifier of untruth would still be incomplete. After all, the movie begins with the completion by Andre of a transatlantic flight that establishes a new record. Andre has pushed scientific progress to a new height. He is a master of technology. He wields it to serve his own purpose – to get back to his beloved Christine faster than any man has ever before returned to his lover, mile for mile. He then seizes the radio apparatus, and

uses it to proclaim to the entire world his emotional state. Afterward, he drives his car into a tree in an attempt to commit suicide. Technology is not only an obstruction of true perception and privacy, it is also reckless. Those who wield it do so at the cost of “rational” behavior. Hence, the use of technology can also be tied to the opposition of rationality and irrationality.

Two particular interchanges regarding food are intriguing. In one, Christine tells a chef to pay careful attention to the type of salt which he will put in the food. One of the guests can only eat “coarse salt.” Later on, a different chef approaches the table at which the servants are eating, and speaks of a Jew who could tell instantly that a potato salad was inferior because the potatoes had not been properly treated with white wine vinegar. The chef proclaims this gentleman, despite his marring ethnicity, to be an authentic aristocrat. The determining seme is a heightened discernment of culinary ingredients, and a knowledge of which ingredients are correct. Both the Jew and the guest are typified as aristocracy by virtue of that seme.

But the reactions of the two chefs are very different. When the first chef is told to only use coarse salt, he agrees vigorously. But when the masters leave, the chef rolls his eyes, indicating his perception of nitpicking. The eye roll is for the benefit of the audience only, and as such, it can be inferred that the audience is intended to identify with the indicated scorn. In this case, the seme is negative. The aristocracy burdens the working class with an excessive and superfluous rules.

In the other case, it is a seme that glorifies the true aristocracy, for whom the working class is happy to serve. Moreover, it is the sole difference between true aristocracy and the rest: ethnicity, in this example, falls by the wayside. The difference between the Jew and the Lady is probably not gender-related, either – Christine’s servant is quite faithful to her. And yet, there is certainly an opposite reading of similar requests. But there is not a sense in the film that unnaturally opposing readings of aristocratic behavior have been posed.

The difference is maybe in the servants. The responses of the servants to the aristocracy indicate characteristics about them. Not only has the same pickiness indicated readings of aristocracy, but it can also be read as reflecting on the servants. The chef in the salt incident is blithe. The audience recognizes his cynicism as typifying a certain attitude among some chefs. The other chef is respectful of his masters, given that they are not poseurs. He is snobby. This attitude is also easily identifiable as a typical chef's attitude.

The hunting scene is the most clear use of the second level of interpretation. Renoir is not tied to portraying the entirety of actions. Rather, he cuts between sequences of hunters shooting and sequences of animals dying without always showing complete actions, or tying a shot animal to a particular shooter. Simply seeing people shoot guns, and then seeing animals getting shot, is enough information for the audience to assemble a whole. But it also allows Renoir to tie the hunt to further levels of meaning. The juxtaposition of animals falling dead in sequence allows a greater impact to come of their death. And that heightened impact leads to an emphasis of the opposition of life and death. There is nothing that strikes the audience as unnatural about the editing sequence, which pays attention either to the hunter or the hunted, but rarely to both of them in the same frame.

There is also an acceptance in the audience of the act of hunting. Conceivably, a society might receive such a scene as appalling. The film emphasizes the excessiveness of the killing by including a poacher who hunts out of necessity. The necessary hunt is illegal, and sternly punishable. The recreational hunt is the height of fun, and game must be protected from hungry peasants for that purpose.

What makes this film brilliant is the fact that nine out of ten viewers can be completely unimpressed with it. Society can, in fact, take for granted all of the opposites posed by the narrative. Thus, Renoir is validated in posing these behaviors as "real." And yet he is able to show the dangers and inconsistencies present in these

paradigms. He shows the hazards of technology, the acceptance of the brutality of hunting, and the disapprobation of hunting by the hungry without straying beyond the limits of acceptability. His opinions are only evidenced in the careful construction of juxtaposed natural behavior.